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Editorial

Understanding teachers as agents of assessment

Pauline Rea-Dickins *University of Bristol*

Teaching involves assessment. In making decisions about lesson content and sequencing, about materials, learning tasks and so forth, teachers have to determine the strengths and weaknesses of the alternatives available to them. They make selections based on their experience, on their understandings of learning, language development and of language proficiency itself, together with what they consider to be most appropriate and in the best interests of those they teach. Equally, as part of their professional practice, they are always involved in the observation of their learners, which leads to the development of insights about learner progress and judgements about specific learning outcomes and overall performance. In my experience, however, when asked about classroom assessment, teachers will tell you first and foremost about the formal mechanisms that are in place to monitor language achievement, or about the specific assessment procedures that they use. There is a tendency to prioritize the 'formal' and the 'procedural' and to underplay the observation-driven approaches to assessment which is strongly in evidence in their everyday classroom practice, such as language sampling (see Gardner and Rea-Dickins, 2002; Rea-Dickins, 2002). This orientation, I suggest, is mirrored in much of our research in language testing and assessment as evidenced by work on language proficiency testing, the focus – over time – of sustained research. Assessment, with specific reference to teaching and learning in the language classroom, has remained, until recently, relatively unresearched. It is interesting to observe that the recent state-of-the-art review (Alderson and Banerjee, 2001) did not include a separate section on either teacher assessment or classroom based assessment. It did, however, contain sub-sections on 'alternative assessment',

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'self-assessment' and on 'assessing young learners', all of which have significant relevance to teacher assessment, as shown through the articles in this special issue.

The relationships between assessment and instruction have been researched and interpreted in a number of ways by language testers and second language acquisition researchers, with four different perspectives mentioned here. A first set of empirical studies has investigated the impact of assessment – formal examinations and assessment frameworks – on classroom instruction. Examples here include Alderson and Wall (1993), Shohamy *et al.* (1996), Cheng (1997) and Wall (1999) in relation to how a high stakes test or a formal system of examinations has impacted on curricula content and classroom materials and activities (see also Read, 2003). These studies have found different washback patterns, including no washback effects at all. The research of Breen *et al.* (1997) is important, and especially relevant to this special issue of *Language Testing*. Their investigations focused on ways in which teachers worked with state-wide assessment frameworks and how these assessment frameworks, rather than formal tests or examinations, were implemented by teachers within their different instructional contexts. Their research also revealed teachers' attitudes towards assessment in general and the frameworks they were expected to work with in particular; see also Arkoudis and O'Loughlin, this issue; Davison, this issue; Scott and Erduran, this issue.

A second perspective on the relationships between assessment and instruction, and the role of the teacher in these processes, is gained through research that has sought to make links between assessment and instruction in terms of the authenticity and congruence of assessment practices in relation to a particular programme of study. Investigations such as these are numerous, many of which focus on the development of assessment procedures to assist teachers in their placement of students. Robinson and Ross (1996), for example, focused on task-based assessment for student placement, comparing performance-referenced and system-referenced procedures in relation to assessment for an EAP (English for Academic Purposes) reading programme. Cushing Weigle and Lynch (1995) in the revision of the ESLPE (English as a Second Language Placement Examination) set out to incorporate activities and academic language skills that reflected target language use needs of students studying through the medium of English; see also Douglas, 2000. Whilst strongly linked to subsequent language teaching and learning, assessment in this sense is not embedded – neither is it intended to be – within instructional sequences. A related line of enquiry in terms of assessment tasks that may claim authenticity

and relevance for teaching and learning include studies such as Wigglesworth (2001), who has attempted to investigate a range of variables that may impact on task difficulty. The assessment tasks manipulated in her research were amongst those used routinely as part of the Australian Adult Migrant Programme 'normally administered for assessment purposes by teachers in the classroom context' (p. 190) and designed to evaluate student achievement. A further point to be made in connection with Wigglesworth's studies is that she engages with current research in second language acquisition (SLA), thus working at the interface between assessment and SLA (see Shohamy, 1994; Bachman and Cohen, 1998; Swain, 2001).

Also focused on the assessment of student outcomes, in relation to curriculum and teaching, are a third group of studies intended to inform on the success of a language programme in terms of learner attainment. For example, Edelenbos and Vinje (2000) have monitored the English performance levels of Dutch primary school children; two of the variables analysed were time spent on learning English and their teachers' pedagogical orientation. A programme of ongoing classroom research, and a content analysis derived from extended observations of primary foreign language classrooms (e.g. Low *et al.*, 1993, a study which began this process) informed the construction of the measures used to evaluate the primary modern languages project in Scotland (Johnstone, 2000).

In all of the studies mentioned above, teacher assessment in one form or another is involved and, thus, from this perspective issues of classroom assessment are not new (see also Lynch, 2001; 2003). There is also the significant work – most notably of Brindley in relation to the Australian Adult Migrant Programme – over a sustained period of time (1989; 1990; 1995; see also Lynch, 2001; 2003). However, in spite of increasing concern at a pedagogical level with alternative assessment (e.g. Huerta-Macias, 1995; Brown, 1996; Norris *et al.*, 1986; O'Malley and Valdez Pierce, 1996; TESOL, 2000; 1998; Alderson and Banerjee, 2001) and instruction-related assessment of achievement, there are few research studies that examine teacher assessment from an instruction-embedded perspective. Exceptions include Teasdale and Leung (2000) whose research was linked to teacher assessment of spoken English as an additional language in mainstream education classrooms and, in particular, on the need to clarify the epistemological bases of different types of assessment; this is a focus subsequently problematized further in Leung (forthcoming). The construct of classroom formative assessment has been investigated in the studies by Rea-Dickins & Gardner (2000) and Rea-Dickins (2001; 2002); see also the review by Andrews (this issue). In the context of a university level language course, Spence

Brown (2001: 463) has investigated the construct of authenticity in an assessment activity designed 'to optimise authenticity'. Through interviews with students she identified a range of factors that compromised the authenticity of learning tasks when used for purposes of assessment, leading her to the conclusion that authenticity must be viewed in terms of the implementation of an activity as well as a function of its design. This relationship between the teacher's agenda, the design of assessments and features of their actual implementation are highly important in classroom assessment research; these are all issues pursued in the articles in this special issue.

It is, perhaps, useful at this point to define teacher assessment more precisely as relating, following Harlen (1996: 129), 'to the *agent* of the assessment, while the formative/summative distinction refers to the *purpose* of the assessment.' In the research reviewed above, the teacher as 'agent' is more prominent in the 'washback' and the classroom-embedded assessment studies, than those that focus on assessments developed and used by teachers for student placement or the measurement of achievement. Indeed, the purposes of assessment have been of central concern in a number of recent publications (e.g., *Language Testing*, volume 18, issue 4) in which McNamara (2001b) and Brindley (2001) both refer to the conflicting demands on teachers within the context of classroom based assessment. Whilst it does not make sense to draw a sharp distinction between purpose and agent, a recognition of such a distinction may be useful to inform the analysis of classroom assessment practices and, thus, this special issue of *Language Testing* is oriented towards research with the teacher as agent in assessment processes.

This focus is first problematised in relation to a teacher's 'diagnostic competence', a notion introduced by Edelenbos and Kubanek-German in their article. Their research in the Netherlands and Germany serves to highlight what has been for so long taken for granted, or not considered at all, i.e., the skills required for and demonstrated by teachers when assessing the language abilities of their learners. Through classroom observation (systematic and ethnographic) and teacher interviews as their primary datasets, the researchers propose a set of descriptors – which readers are invited to critique and to trial—to be used as the basis for identifying a teacher's skills in assessing their students. This research also reflects the growing concern in teacher based assessment to understand the means by which teachers assess the English language development of their students (see Breen *et al.*, 1997).

It is interesting to note that in their investigation of how teachers arrive at their grading decisions (Arkoudis and O'Loughlin), their

assessment context involves significant 'high stakes' issues and, in particular, accountability in relation to reporting mechanisms for the language centre director concerned. The tensions that emerge for the teachers in both this and the Davison study confirm previous findings (see, for example, Brindley, 2001; McNamara, 2001b; Rea-Dickins, 2001) that teachers find themselves at the confluence of different assessment cultures and faced with significant dilemmas in their assessment practices: sometimes torn between their role as facilitator and monitor of language development and that of assessor and judge of language performance as achievement. This is clearly demonstrated in the research by Arkoudis and O'Loughlin, who report on their interaction with teachers working with a state mandated assessment *Curriculum standards framework* (CSF; Board of Studies, 2000) who are developing meaningful and accurate assessments of their students. For some time, there has been a belief lurking that, unlike formal tests and examinations, classroom based teacher assessment does not represent a high stakes context (see Rea-Dickins and Gardner, 2000). However, this view of classroom assessment – as low stakes – is not corroborated by research findings such as those reported here.

Davison's research focuses on teachers' beliefs about and their reported understandings of assessment within different national contexts (Hong Kong and Australia). She investigates how teachers make their assessment decisions (see Breen *et al.*, 1997), which enables her to posit different teacher assessment orientations. Her research highlights the importance of creating opportunities for teacher interaction about assessment issues through which teachers not only develop greater understandings of particular assessment frameworks and criteria but are also stimulated to explore their often implicit constructs and interpretations of learner performance.

The role of standards and criteria in teacher assessment processes is taken further by Scott and Erduran's review essay, which analyses two specific assessment frameworks: *ESL development: language and literacy in schools* (McKay, *et al.*, 1994) and *ESL standards for pre-K–12 students* (TESOL, 1997). They contribute to our knowledge base of what, potentially, such assessment frameworks have to offer both to teachers' understandings and their subsequent implementation of classroom assessment (see Breen *et al.*, 1997). Their analysis demonstrates the valuable work that has already been done internationally in developing appropriate assessment frameworks that promote, on the one hand, learner inclusion and, on the other hand, recognize learner diversity and support teachers in describing their learners' language development across the curriculum.

The research by Leung and Mohan takes the reader firmly into the classroom and engages with current conceptualizations of formative teacher assessment that has the potential to drive (language) learning forward. Interaction within classroom assessment processes is their primary concern, and they centre their analysis of classroom discourse on the learners themselves in collaboration with their teacher. In their research, they draw on functional systemic linguistics to theoretically inform how this type of assessment is accomplished through teacher–student discourse.

Continuing this focus on classroom interaction, Harlen and Winter write from the position of researchers into the assessment of science and mathematics education, respectively. They, too, provide a window into current conceptualizations of classroom based assessment from general educational assessment perspectives and exemplify research informed ‘best practice’ in teacher assessment through their own subject disciplines. The reader will be able to see the resonance between their work and the research of both Edelenbos and Kubanek-German and Leung and Mohan who also prioritize the value of interaction in understanding teacher assessment and student learning through classroom interactions. Assessment through interaction is further addressed by Andrews in her review of Torrance and Pryor (1998).

A focus on classroom interaction within different assessment ‘events’ has been a unifying theme across most of the research studies reported in this special issue and a central means through which teacher assessment processes may be illuminated. Cheng, Rogers and Hu, however, present a report of some of their findings from a comparative survey of teacher assessment practices in three different tertiary institutional contexts: Canada, Hong Kong and China. Their research demonstrates the range of procedures that teachers report using when making decisions about their students’ language abilities and reinforces some of the complexities at play. This work is part of a larger study that also involved teacher interviews (not reported here) thus raising issues as to how – most appropriately – researchers can develop greater insights into classroom based assessment. Cheng *et al.* show the range of information that is captured through a survey but also identify its limitations and the need to engage with a multi-layered approach. In this connection, it is my belief that discourse studies have considerable potential: not only for elucidating the means by which teachers take assessment decisions and implement assessment in their classrooms, but also as a powerful tool for the understanding and validation of language proficiency testing (see, for example, O’Sullivan, 2002).

In an earlier volume of *Language Testing*, McNamara (2001a: 332) describes the studies presented there as 'only a beginning on the vast task of renovating our research directions to reflect more closely the emerging theoretical insights into the role of assessment as social practice'. The aim of this special issue is to engage in this debate and to open up the issues further. There is still much work to be done, with discourse analysis and ethnographic approaches both important in this respect.

Discourse is a means of talking and writing about and acting upon worlds, a means which both constructs and is constructed by a set of social practices within these worlds, and in doing so both reproduces and constructs afresh particular social-discursive practices, constrained or encouraged by more macro movements in the overarching social formation. (Candlin, 1997: viii)

The teacher as assessor both engages with and creates discourses of assessment at different levels: the individual teacher(s), the cultural context of the classroom, at professional and institutional levels, all of which – in turn – reflect the different political as well as social contexts in which the teachers work. These interactions – as acutely observed by several of the articles included in this issue – may be seen as potentially both productive and facilitative as well as inhibiting to effective classroom assessment. This special issue focuses on aspects of classroom assessment that, hitherto, have been relatively unexplored and highlights – through the studies reported here – a kaleidoscope of perspectives on teacher agency in assessment. In a climate where there is a proliferation of summative measures of learner performance, and increased target setting (e.g., in the national curriculum context in England, or in Hong Kong) that is largely related to the quest for greater transparency of standards through school accountability, the centrality of discourse analysis – whether as an independent research approach or used in combination with more familiar procedures such as formal tests or surveys – is shown to be a valuable means in developing and pressing forward our understandings of classroom teacher assessment.

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